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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001456

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PHALANGE LEADER SAYS MARCH 14 WILL FIGHT
ON

REF: BEIRUT 1442

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a September 20 condolence call on Phalange party leader Amine Gemayel following the September 19 assassination of March 14 Phalange MP Antoine Ghanem, the former President said March 14 will continue to fight back politically, despite the "apocalypse of Sin el-Fil". Gemayel stressed the need for a strong president, but dismissed concerns that a president elected by absolute majority would divide the country, arguing the risk was there regardless. March 14 would go this route if necessary because Ghanem's death was an attack not just on the issue of the presidency, however, but the entire Lebanese political system. Gemayel found the September 19 Maronite Bishops' statement encouraging, especially its rejection of a parliamentary boycott. Free Patriotic Movement leader General Aoun clearly did not digest the statement well, in his opinion. Gemayel stressed the need for continuing international support, and said it would be an important political signal if UNIIIC's investigation of the crime produces tangible results. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, paid a condolence call on Phalange party leader (himself no stranger to assassination attempts, being the father of slain March 14 MP Pierre Gemayel and son of slain former PresidentQBashir Gemayel) Amine Gemayel on September 20, the day after a deadly car bomb killed Phalange MP Antoine Ghanem (reftel). Gemayel was meeting with the newly arrived Egyptian Ambassador and another Egyptian Embassy official at the time, and both remained during the Ambassador's call.

SECRETARY OFFERS CONDOLENCES

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3. (C) During the meeting, the Ambassador was to reach Secretary Rice, in Ramallah with Palestinian leader Abu

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Mazen, by phone, who spoke directly with Gemayel to offer her condolences. Gemayel thanked the US for its support, stressing that March 14 has the "faith and determination" to continue to do everything possible to preserve and strengthen Lebanon's democracy. We will not surrender, we will not abdicate, he stressed; we will go all the way. Gemayel told the Secretary March 14 would not be intimidated by assassins who were trying to destroy the country by creating chaos and turmoil. Thanking the Secretary for her condolences, Gemayel called Ghanem's death a "real tragedy" for Lebanon.

4. (U) As-Safir newspaper picked up on the call, reporting that the Secretary confirmed the US commitment to support Lebanon in its battle for freedom, sovereignty, unity and independence and stressed the importance of holding presidential elections to prevent obstruction by the Syrian regime and its allies in Lebanon. (Note: An-Nahar newspaper also reported the Secretary and A/S Welch's call to Druse leader Walid Jumblatt. Having been party to only one side of the conversation, we are not in a position to verify the accuracy of these press statements. End note.)

5. (C) Gemayel thanked the Ambassador for the Secretary's call, noting it was encouraging to feel the support of countries like the US and Egypt. The most important thing now, he said, was to find a way to fight back politically. He noted that it would not be easy to maintain March 14 morale after the "apocalypse of Sin el-Fil" (a reference to the Christian suburb in east Beirut where the bombing occurred), adding that his own house, only 50 meters away, also had been damaged in the blast.

BISHOPS STATEMENT PROVIDES MUCH-NEEDED BACKING

16. (C) The Ambassador commented that the Maronite Bishops' September 19 statement, issued just hours before the attack (septel), provided March 14 with good ammunition for moving ahead. Gemayel agreed, calling it essential for MPs to attend parliament, as prescribed by the statement. Commenting on Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel

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Aoun's statement on Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation's "Khalam al-Nas the night of the attack, Gemayel said the Patriarch received a harsh reaction from Aoun, who apparently didn't digest the Bishops' statement very well. (Note: Aoun essentially accused March 14 of orchestrating Qe assassination to achieve its own political ends, resulting in the Ambassador's decision to cancel a planned September 21 meeting with the General, which the Ambassador shared with press at his September 20 meeting with the Patriarch, septel. End note.)

INTERNATIONAL, UN SUPPORT ESSENTIAL

17. (S) Gemayel reiterated the importance of demonstrated international support, expressing his hope that the UN would take action. PM Siniora called him following the assassination, saying he had called UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon to ask UNIIIC to investigate the attack in the assumption that it would find links to previous attacks. Gemayel also hoped that the investigation would lead somewhere as soon as possible and that the next Brammertz report would help identify the perpetrators, thus serving as a kind of intimidation to deter future attacks and sending a strong political signal. (Note: The drafter of the report, Mathieu Lefevre, Assistant to UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz, told Pol/Econ Chief and visiting NEA/ELA Deputy Director Steve Newhouse on September 12 that he expected to begin in about a month, but was unclear yet whether it would be primarily a technical or substantive report. He did, however, leave us with the impression that the report would contain enough information to start building cases against certain parties. End note.)

18. (C) Chiming in, the Egyptian Ambassador noted that Ghanem had arrived at the scene only two hours earlier, and had not taken the usual route. Gemayel responded that the attack was the work of professionals who were constantly coming up with new techniques to "do their dirty job." The same was true in the cases of his own son's assassination, as well as with the 2005 killing of former PM Rafik Hariri. "They're investing huge means and effort," he concluded.

19. (C) Responding to Ghanem's request for suggestions in how to counter these efforts, the Ambassador noted that the UN currently was discussing how to respond, and that Siniora's phone was essential in helping to increase international understanding. The US would also continue to work with the French, he said, adding that the Secretary would meet with FM Bernard Kouchner the next day in Washington.

SOVEREIGN LEBANESE STATE AT STAKE

110. (C) Gemayel agreed that not only the presidential elections were at stake anymore; the entire Lebanese political system was under siege. Furthermore, he and the Egyptian Ambassador had agreed that March 14 needed support in its efforts to find a political solution, ideally one that had the consensus of two-thirds of parliament, in order to preserve the country's unity and national interests. A strong president was also essential; a weak one would only "endorse the partition that is already a reality," Gemayel stressed.

111. (C) Hizballah, through its separate infrastructure, security, communication, and social networks, had already built "quasi-sovereign" strongholds on Lebanese soil, such as the south, the southern Beirut suburbs, and the Biqa'. An "electroshock" was needed to deal with them. A weak president would only give further cover (an "umbrella") to Hizballah, because he would be unable to be an effective interlocutor with Hizballah, Iran, and Syria. A weak president also would undermine the Christian community, so essential to the national confessional balance. If Lebanon failed to produce a strong, consensus president along the lines of "an interlocutor with a capital I," it would be catastrophic, Gemayel warned, because it would confirm the legitimacy of partitioning the country. March 14 would be left with no choice but to elect a president "by any means."

112. (C) Gemayel dismissed the danger of electing a president

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by absolute majority, arguing the danger of partition existed regardless. He also discounted the opposition's threats of ensuing chaos should March 14 with an absolute majority candidate, claiming Hizballah didn't want a civil war, which would be "suicide" for the Party of God. It is time to rebuild Lebanon's democratic system and sovereignty, he said, and get rid of the consequences of years of hegemony. A weak

president would only continue Syrian and Iranian "tutelage" and would be a disaster for Lebanon's future. UNSCR 1559 was a miracle in forcing Syrian troops to leave, but if Syria continues to control the presidency, eventually it will take control of the government and impose a new electoral law that will favor Syrian candidates. Citing an Arabic proverb, Gemayel said that control of Lebanon was an "old dream" for Syria.

TKING A MOMENT FOR SELF-PROMOTION

13. (C) Lebanon needs a strong interlocutor not only on the international level, but also locally, one who is able to dialogue with all of the political groups. A weak president risked falling into Syria's trap. Explaining that he was not advocating a "machine gun-wielding" president, Gemayel repeated again the need for a strong one. Referring to condolence calls he received following the assassination of a Hizballa MP on behalf of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, as well as from opposition leaders Berri and Aoun, Gemayel (obviously suggesting himself) said it was not impossible to have such a candidate, one who can both talk to others and defend Lebanon's sovereignty.

MARCH 14 WILL USE ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IF NECESSARY

14. (C) Responding to the Egyptian Ambassador's question as to whether March 14 still had an absolute majority, Gemayel said that at a recent March 14 meeting with Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, both Moammar Safadi (widely considered to be one of March 14's less dependable MPs) and Boutros Harb insisted on a two-thirds quorum. His impression from reading the Bishops' statement was that the stronger the majority, the stronger the backing the president would have of the "forces in the field."

1. (C) If, however, March 14 is unable to secure the two-thirds, "any kind of election is better than a vacuum," Gemayel said. Insisting that he himself was not advocating the use of an absolute majority, and never mentioned in public, Gemayel repeated that a vacuum would be a disaster. It was better to have a minimum of recognition, both at the local and international levels, than a void. People would have to recognize the president one day or another, and this was the best (and fairest) to restart the process of a national dialogue. If the opposition refused to recognize the president, it would be labeled a traitor to democracy. FELTMAN